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SUBJECT: Somalia - Violent Uprising Against Al-Shabaab

11. (SBU) Summary: Since December 27, local residents and militias, loosely led by Ahlu Sunna wal Jama'a (ASWJ), a group of moderate Islamic scholars, have clashed with al-Shabaab in response to al-Shabaab takeovers of central Somali towns and the subsequent desecration of graves in central Somalia. ASWJ reports that they have ousted al-Shabaab from several towns and are enjoying popular support throughout Somalia. Post is in contact with the Nairobi-based members of an ASWJ-affiliated organization. End summary.

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Nexus of  
the Clashes  
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12. (SBU) Since December 27, militias loyal to the moderate Islamic group Ahlu Sunna wal Jama'a (ASWJ), with support from local residents, have reportedly clashed with al-Shabaab militia in towns in the central Somali region of Galgudud. Residents were reportedly in part reacting to the December 6 and 7 al-Shabaab capture of the towns of Guriel and Dusamareb. Embassy contacts recount that ASWJ and local clan militia were meeting in the town of Heraale (Galgadud region) when al-Shabaab militia seized control of Guriel and Dusamareb. Al-Shabaab's unprovoked attacks on the local administrations, coupled with desecrations of places of pilgrimage and the tombs of revered Sufi clerics, appeared to have catalyzed ASWJ counterattacks. Among the most scandalous of the grave desecrations was that of the tomb of Sheikh Samatar, a well-respected cleric and founder of the Samataria Sufi sect. On several occasions al-Shabaab militia also disrupted ASWJ "hatra" rituals, which involve song and poetry, terming them "un-islamic".

13. (SBU) In response, ASWJ mobilized militias and, with support from local residents from across the clan spectrum, engaged al-Shabaab in a series of battles. (Note: The Ayr are the predominant clan in the area, but minority subclans including the Sa'ad, Saleebaan, Murasade, Marehan and Majerteen sided against al-Shabaab as well.) According to Embassy contacts, al-Shabaab forces retreated to Galinsoor, near Galkayo. While preparing a counterattack, the al-Shabaab militias were besieged by Sa'ad militias from Galkayo, who killed eight al-Shabaab militia members and seized two of their "technicals" (battle wagons). Ethiopian forces based at the border town of Balambale reportedly deployed to the outskirts of Guriel on December 29, forcing a further al-Shabaab retreat. Several days of heavy fighting, with at least 30 deaths and dozens of wounded, have reportedly forced al-Shabaab to withdraw.

14. (SBU) According to sources in Somalia, these most recent clashes in the central region are part of a broader attempt by various groups in Somalia to gain control of territory in advance of the pending Ethiopian withdrawal. However, these most recent clashes

may also be evidence of increasing resentment of al-Shabaab.

15. (SBU) On December 28, an al-Shabaab spokesman Mukhtar Robow, seemingly at pains to explain why his group was overpowered in the clashes, alleged to the media that there were only a few al-Shabaab militia left in Guriel when ASWJ attacked. Robow claimed that the majority of al-Shabaab forces were involved in mediation efforts between warring communities outside the town and were not able to defend themselves against attack. Robow further claimed that it was an Ethiopian-organized group, not ASWJ, which had attacked al-Shabaab.

16. (SBU) Sheikh Abdirashid Maalim, coordinator of the Somali Traditional Scholars (SOTIS), an ASWJ offshoot with representation in Nairobi, told us that ASWJ's patience with al-Shabaab was wearing thin, and they had felt compelled to stop the desecration of revered religious monuments. In a December 31 meeting with us, he termed the current clashes "a defensive war." Sheikh Abdirashid said ASWJ have remained a non-political and nonviolent spiritual body through centuries of existence in Somalia. Al-Shabaab evidently viewed ASWJ's deep roots in Somalia as a threat, he thought. Referring to clashes in central region, Sheikh Abdirashid told us the Somali civilians in Mogadishu, Gedo Region, and Lower Shabelle, under ASWJ leadership, had organized themselves in reaction to the continued desecration of shrines and graves in Somalia. Abdirashid believed that the current popular uprising was the beginning of a wider revolution against al-Shabaab's "corrupt" view of Islam and its oppressive tendencies.

17. (SBU) ASWJ leadership from "dariiqas", or parishes, across Somalia and eastern Ethiopia (Ahmediya, Salihiya, Qadiriya and

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Samataria) met in Mogadishu on December 27. Under the acting chairmanship of Sheikh Abdulqadir Samow, who is also ASWJ's spokesman, the group discussed the al-Shabaab threat at length and resolved to revolt. They also drafted a document outlining the group's view of the current situation in Somalia and seeking international support.

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Somali Islamic Front  
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18. (SBU) Another group involved in the current clashes is the Somali Islamic Front (SIF), a purist Salafi organization and an offshoot of former al-Itihad al-Islami (AIAI) and also known as Jabhal Islamia. Members of the SIF have spoken out in support of al-Shabaab during the recent clashes. According to Embassy contacts, SIF is allied with al-Shabaab in its opposition to ASWJ but, unlike al-Shabaab, has shown respect for local administrations and is opposed to infighting among "resistant" groups. SIF has attempted to mediate between al-Shabaab and the two factions of the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS) in an effort to forestall infighting.

19. (SBU) Clerics allied to the SIF have openly condemned the killing of Somalis and aid workers. In a statement carried by Somali websites, SIF said "while opposed to all un-Islamic heresies, we are not a party to the current campaign of destroying and desecrating tombs of the dead. The Front believes in a more methodical process of eliminating heresies, through education and building social awareness. The Front denies any involvement in the ongoing destruction of tombs." In an apparent reference to ASWJ, SIF described one side as fighting a proxy war for the "enemy."

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Post Interaction with ASWJ  
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110. (SBU) Post has met with SOTIS, the ASWJ offshoot. SOTIS has requested USG cooperation with and support for its campaign against al-Shabaab. The group plans to submit to us in the next week a plan for future activities. SOTIS hopes to establish "bases" in Mogadishu, Gedo Region, and central Somalia, from which they can continue ASWJ's work.

